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ABSTRACT

This progress report of ethnographic research on instructional leadership focuses on a new elementary school principal's role formation in relation to teaching staff and district organizational culture. The project, which examines the prevailing notion of instructional leadership in school effectiveness literature, reveals a gap in perspective between teachers and administrators concerning implications of mandated policies for classroom life. Researchers investigated factors contributing to the principals' identity formation and changes in teachers' and principals' role definitions during research. Intervention methodology--which assumes that teachers possess answers--had researchers share classroom observations and videotapes with principal and teachers. Informants' articulation about experiences and reexamination of tacit knowledge about teaching outcomes challenged the dominant "workshop" view of carefully moving participants up one conceptual notch at a time. With intervention, teachers and principal altered perceptions about roles and accountability. Understanding teachers' expectations thereby becomes a key ingredient of organizational effectiveness. School effectiveness literature treats principals and teachers as both the problem and solution for school improvement. This leads policymakers to demand tighter coupling in the organization whereby teachers and principals are held even more accountable for student performance on standardized tests, thus discouraging innovation. Research findings about role formation will suggest further investigation on ways the principal may legitimize teacher knowledge in school improvement efforts, as well as principal influence on teacher decision making. (CJH)

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THE ART OF BECOMING AN INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER

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Introduction

This paper provides a description of research to-date and a plan for further research on the formation of the role and identity of an elementary school principal. The results of the project when completed will be an ethnography of instructional leadership. This research follows from over one year of study in a school at the classroom and building-administration levels supported by the Institute for Research on Teaching at Michigan State University. The continuation of this project will serve to develop further the descriptive data that has been collected on the organizational culture of the building and its articulation with district-level policies which, like many other districts in the nation, have been greatly influenced by the literature on school effectiveness (c.f. Brookover and Lezotte, 1977; Edmonds, 1978; Purkey and Smith, 1983; Weber, 1971).

Purpose and Scope of the Project

The purpose of this project has been to describe, through ethnographic research, the formation of the identity of a principal and to explore the linkages between the identity which she has embraced with the identity that she perceives as indicative of the "acceptable norm" in the district in which she works. The research questions are:

a. How is a new building principal forming her own identity of an instructional leader, drawing from her previous 13 years as a special education resource teacher?

b. How does the organizational culture of the district in which she works affect the formation of this identity?

c. What are the dominant or initial fears, insecurities, challenges, or otherwise anxiety-creating situations which this first year principal must face and how do these interact with her own identity formation process?

d. Who are the key actors in the formation of district-level policy from the principal's perspective and what role do they play in the formation of her identity?

e. How does the principal define her own role in the building and the district?

f. How do the policies of the district interact with the principal's process of defining an "appropriate" role for herself?

g. What changes, if any, in the principal's identity and definition of role occur as the principal articulates in writing and during interviews, her knowledge of school practices, teachers' knowledge about practice, and leadership?

h. What changes in the principal's identity and definition of role occur as she participates in a project focused on changes in teachers' conceptions of and practices in classroom instruction?

Project on Teacher Development and Organizational Change

A little over a year ago, several colleagues and I began working with three teachers and their building principal in a local district on implementing and documenting a bottom-up strategy of teacher development. The project was primarily intended to stimulate teachers to reflect more deeply on their practice and to report on their reflections orally and in writing; to create a receptive audience in the district for the teachers' reports; and to study the changes the teachers implement in their classroom practices, as well as the

conceptual and organizational changes that occur for the teachers, their audience, and the researchers. However, since we serendipitously selected a building with a new principal who had spent the previous thirteen years as a special education resource teacher, we decided to include her transition from teaching to building administration as a component of staff development and the research.

This study was unique in focusing its interventions on both individual teachers and the building administrator, as well as on district personnel practices. Teachers were seen as practitioners capable of becoming more reflective and articulate about their instructional strategies; the building and district were seen as organizational contexts that influence the ways in which teachers implement what they learn by working with us and through other approaches to staff development. The principal was seen as having a key brokering position for understanding the organizational context at the district and building levels, and for negotiating organizational change with teachers and district administrators. This dual focus on teachers and a principal was especially important because of differences in perspective and interest among various parties involved in staff development efforts at the classroom, building and district levels. The scientific and educational importance of this project was that by combining staff development with research on teacher professional development and organizational change, it was able to explore relationships among characteristics of teachers, the organizational contexts for instruction and staff development, and the differences in perspectives held by those involved in planning, conducting, participating in, and doing research on staff development.

A distinctive feature of this work was its view of the nature of educational reform. In the literature on school reform and in various efforts at curriculum innovation and staff development, it has often been claimed that teachers in U.S. schools are unusually resistant to change. An alternative view is possible: teachers' reluctance to adopt new standard operating procedures can be seen not simply as recalcitrance or stupidity; rather, their resistance to certain kinds of changes can be interpreted as derived from a view of classroom practice which differs in fundamental, qualitative ways from views held by educational policymakers, curriculum developers, school administrators and educational researchers. The role of the principal in developing the appropriate organizational context for the emergence of this teachers' view seems crucial, yet problemmatic given the demands placed on principals as middle-level managers in the district hierarchy. While on one hand, the implicit dichotomy in the identity of the principal to be both administrator and teacher advocate, is the bane of many would be instructional leaders, the development of survival skills (e.g., code switching, managing different discourse strategies, etc.) for such a diversity of roles, can also facilitate a greater degree of receptiveness to innovation and organizational change from the bottom-up than higher levels in the administration. Indeed, some preliminary data from the project indicate that most of the principal's day is spent receiving demands to mediate between district personnel and teachers, parents and teachers, teachers and students, students and students, etc. However, a principal's role is not all passive-receptive; it also entails opportunities to be innovative and change fundamentally the relations among actors in the school, but not without risk.

Evidence of the conflict created for principals by, on the one hand attempting to foster the articulation of the teacher view, and on the other hand, managing and implementing district policies, is illustrated in the low institutional status of the teacher's point of view and the inadequacy of supporting resources to foster a professional disposition among teachers especially time for reflection and the development of a way of talking about teaching problems and their possible solution that is understood by the non-teaching members of the organization. Even if a building administrator believed that such a teacher view is important, radical changes in the teacher's work life would be necessary to stimulate on-going reflection on what teachers already know, and to stimulate teachers to develop their conceptions further as their experience increases. Such radical changes in the organizational context requires principals, as brokers for teachers, to themselves be more articulate about and knowledgeable of teachers' views and the importance of the teachers' perspective in the development of an effective school environment.

One result of the absence of a significant place for teachers' own accounts of their practice in administrative procedures is a gap in perspective between teachers and administrators concerning the nature of daily life in classrooms and the implications of that life for the implementation of mandated policies and procedures. Neither the teacher, who has not been accustomed to speak or write on such issues, nor the administrator, who is not typically oriented to listening, can close this perspective gap readily. It follows that if one is to take the practical wisdom of the teacher seriously in staff development, one needs to work not only with teachers to help them articulate and deepen their insights into practice, but also with administrators to familiarize them with teachers' "bottom-up" views of school policy and classroom practice. It is for

this reason that I believe the intervention which occurred at both the classroom level and the building administration level was so crucial for beginning to understand different and often competing organizational cultures. It has been particularly important for understanding in a rich descriptive fashion what has been coined in the school effectiveness literature as "instructional leadership."

Progress To-Date

One result of this project has been that both the teachers and their principal changed in their own conceptions of teaching and their role in the educational process. This is not a surprising outcome for this project since it began on the premise that teachers have answers and the purpose of the intervention was to assist them in becoming more articulate about their views of practice. Researchers observed classrooms and exchanged journal writings with the teachers regarding phenomena observed. Videotapes of classroom interaction were also collected for later review and further reflection by both teachers and researchers. In addition, teachers themselves exchanged their views of teaching, sharing for the first time, deep-seated but unexpressed concerns about teaching. A dominant theme among the teachers was their anxiety over having "100% responsibility" for students' learning and the organizational context of instruction. The articulation of this concern was the first major breakthrough achieved by the teachers and researchers about the teachers' own view of their practice and role in education.

How teachers learn from experience is a central issue for staff development. The typical short-term intensive workshop is largely premised on the notion that carefully planned, closely linked experiences, moving participants up a conceptual notch at a time, is the most effective strategy

for learning. However, we discovered that learning from one's own experience occurs in sudden spurts, usually with key events or crisis as the catalyst for change. In the experience of each teacher, following the ferment of their own realization of their concerns over the pressures of the classroom, a major event marked a turning point in their own conceptions of teaching and how they organized the instructional context. For one teacher it was the sudden realization that a worksheet with which she had worked for years was "dumb" and that for the task for which she had assumed there existed only one correct answer, there were in fact several possible correct responses. Although in the past, students had been showing her that there were several ways of doing the task correctly, she did not recognize the multiplicity of answers until she had first begun reflecting on her own teaching and questioning her own assumptions about teaching itself. This willingness to re-examine one's tacit knowledge and ask new questions led to new insights which in turn led to greater experimentation with student directed learning and the opening of new possibilities for classroom organization. She said of her past teaching that her own anxieties of being "100% responsible" caused her to put a ceiling on the learning that was possible for students. By changing her expectations of how teaching and thus learning can take place in the classroom, she not only altered her own role-status in the classroom, but also that of her students. Now she refers to her relationship to her students as a "spiral" of learning--she expects more and they respond by demanding more and she in turn changes her expectations further and together they achieve higher and higher levels of learning that is no longer bound by her anxieties of having to maintain control over the learning or being the dispenser of right answers.

The principal made similar conceptual changes in her thinking about teaching and her role as the building administrator. Picture a new person in the principal's office. While she is familiar to the district, the building and the teachers are relatively new to her. As a special education resource teacher for the district, she had an opportunity to build rapport with some teachers throughout the district, but the bottom-line was, she could no longer be concerned with only special needs students. She had to be responsible for all the students in a building in which she was an outsider. (Parenthetically, I should add that, like many schools in parts of the country, no new teachers had been hired for several years and her closest competition for the job was a teacher in the building.) It is also important to keep in mind that this person had spent the majority of her professional career dealing with emotional and learning disabilities. During this time, she came to rely upon a warm, friendly personality with an ability to be stern, but a penchant for affection to be effective in her role. Now, as a new building principal in the poorest in terms of the socio-economic background of the students and one of the most heterogeneous elementary schools in the district, she began by feeling she had to be a stern, authoritarian administrator to maintain control. Indeed, at a personal level, this role shift from a secure personal style that was admittedly "warm and fuzzy" seemed diametrically opposed to the image of a building administrator she felt was expected of her by her superiors as well as by the teachers, staff, students and parents. How else, she reasoned could she be "100% responsible" for the quality of instruction, management and progess of the institution.

As might be surmised, the principal's own conceptual change about her role in the institution changed in parallel fashion with that of the teachers. Initial analysis of the process that led to conceptual change indicates that

continuous interviews in which the interviewer asked probing questions about day-to-day events, in addition to their exchange of journal writing, stimulated a much greater degree of reflection on the principal's decision-making and her emerging role definition than might have otherwise occurred without the intervention. While the interviewer largely maintained his neutrality as appropriate to the ethnographic interview, he did introduce issues which might be considered subjective or directive. The purpose of these digressions from a "pure research" agenda was to contrast reflections on the existing organizational context with other imaginable, yet non-existent patterns of relations.

Participating in the teachers' discussions of their own process of conceptual change was also an important catalyst for the principal to re-examine her assumptions about teaching and her emerging role definition. At one point in the research team's process of developing a community of discourse about teachers' problems of practice, the principal reported to the researcher her frustrations with the notion of instructional leadership as being accountable for student outcomes, only to hear the teachers express similar sentiments with regard to their classroom instruction in a large group meeting which followed the research interview. The reoccurring theme of accountability and 100% responsibility led both teachers and principal to a completely different definition of role relationships between teachers and principals. The process of reflection in a professionally supportive environment helped the participants to make explicit their tacit knowledge about what teachers know and altered their expectations of what teachers are capable of achieving with the appropriate leadership and resources. For the principal, this meant beginning to gain new insights into the nature of the organizational context which is necessary to foster the development and raise the institutional status

of teachers' views. In other words, beginning to develop a more personal and intuitively correct definition of an "effective school" and "institutional leadership."

Future Directions

Having begun to achieve a more satisfying definition of a principal's role in the building and reconceptualizing her views of leadership, the principal has been faced with another dilemma--how to translate these insights into the context characterized by a strong orientation towards the effective schools movement. Throughout the project, the principal assuaged her feelings about this dilemma by holding to the belief (or hope)that the intervention which occurred was compatible with the effective schools and effective teaching approach embraced by the district. However, she only acknowledged an underlying belief that the two may not be compatible. Having acknowledged this possibility, the principal currently finds herself in a greater dilemma of enthusiastically supporting the intervention with teachers and the kinds of organizational changes in the worklife of teachers it represents, and feeling that she lacks the means to articulate this innovation in an organizational context which represents a fundamentally different view of teachers' knowledge. The dominant question for the principal, and for the research which will proceed in the future is, "How can the intervention which has altered the institutional status of teachers' knowledge be explained and expanded upon in the context of a strong orientation towards the "effective schools" approach to school reform?

The initial premise of the intervention was that teachers have answers. It is exemplified in the vignette of the teacher's conceptual change process above, and it is a key element in the principal's own conception of her role in

the building. According to Cuban (1984), the literature on school effectiveness treats principals and teachers as both the problem and the solution for school improvement. This assumption leads policymakers and administrators attempting to implement school improvment based on the school effectiveness literature to demand tighter coupling in the organization whereby teachers and principals are held more accountable for student performance as measured on standardized tests, the very nature of which, according to this research, increases the dissatisfaction of teachers and principals and discourages innovations which promote other goals which are less visible to policymakers and high-level administrators. Although high expectations, instructional leadership, an orderly environment, a positive climate, and consensus over academic goals appear complimentary to the intervention described here, their association with higher test scores in the school effectiveness literature severly limits any chance that teachers' views will have meaning in the discussions on school improvement policy decisions. Cuban confirms the unlikelihood that the institutional status of teachers' views can be raised by the school effectiveness approach in his observation that, "A tighter coupling between the central office and individual schools along particular lines--such as goal setting, monitoring, evaluating, and specifying outcomes--often gets translated into the familiar pattern of top-down implementation" (1984, p.138). Therefore, another key question for future investigation is, what other measures for learning can be used besides standardized tests to document the significance of this innovation for teaching and learning?

Conclusion

A significant outcome of the research completed thus far has been an insight into the role of the principal which contrasts dramatically with the notion of "instructional leadership" in the school effectiveness literature. Future research will take this side effect from research on teacher knowledge and organizational change and make it a focal point of study. The dominant question which future research will address is, how does the principal articulate the nature of the innovation (such as breaking the isolation of teachers, reorganizing the worklife of teachers to allow time to reflect on their own practice, creating an audience for teachers' views of practice, fostering collegial relations in the school, basing staff development efforts on the assumption that teachers have answers, etc.) in the context of district policies which are heavily oriented towards improving test results as the "legitimate" measure of school improvement? Two related questions which reflect continuing efforts to describe the organizational context of instruction are, how does the principal influence teachers' decision making? And, under what conditions do teachers allow the principal to influence what they do?

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